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LONDON AND PARIS FOR NEA WATCHER

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: OPPOSITION PARTIES TOSSES THEIR HATS INTO
ELECTIONS RING

REF: TUNIS 1092

Classified By: Ambassador Robert F. Godec for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Two Tunisian opposition parties represented in parliament will present candidates during the 2009 presidential elections, bringing the total number of eligible candidates to four. Of the candidates, Popular Unity Party (PUP) head Mohamed Bouchiha and Democratic Unionist Union (UDU) Secretary General Ahmed Inoubli are both close to the ruling party. The quasi-independent at-Tajdid's ("Renewal" Party) First Secretary, Ahmed Ibrahim, has also announced his candidacy. In conversation with the Ambassador, at-Tajdid stressed the importance of more steps toward free and fair elections. End Summary.

Race to a Forgone Conclusion

¶2. (C) In October, both the UDU and at-Tajdid announced that the heads of their parties, Ahmed Inoubli and Ahmed Ibrahim respectively, will run for president in 2009. Both parties are represented in parliament, and the announcements were expected. UDU is considered to be extremely close to the ruling Democratic Constitutional Rally (RCD). Indeed, the day after he announced his candidacy Inoubli met with President Ben Ali. Unlike UDU, at-Tajdid has attempted to assert its independence, most notably when its representatives in Parliament voted against the GOT-proposed law amending the constitutional provisions on criteria for presidential candidacy. During an October 6 meeting with the Ambassador (reftel), Ibrahim stated that his party wanted to participate in a truly democratic process, even if that meant that the party would lose. Ibrahim opined that the current electoral situation is far from free and fair, but said that if he chose to run he would try to genuinely campaign for his party's platform.

¶3. (C) So far, four of the five parties eligible to have presidential candidates have announced they will participate in the elections. They are the ruling RCD, UDU, et-Tajdid, and the Popular Unity Party, which is headed by the President's brother-in-law, Mohamed Bouchiha. The Secretary General of the Social Democratic Movement (MDS) is prevented from running, due to age restrictions. The heads of the Democratic Forum for Labor and Freedom (FDTL) and the Green Party for Progress (PVP) are unable to run because they were appointed to their positions, not elected. The Progressive Democratic Party (PDP) chose a candidate other than its elected Secretary General, Maya Jribi. According to the recently promulgated constitutional amendment, the PDP's

announced candidate, former Secretary General Nejib Chebbi, cannot legally run for office. On November 8, the 80 members of the PDP's Central Committee will meet to discuss the 2009 legislative and presidential elections, including the possible substitution of Jribi's candidacy for Chebbi's.

Comment

¶4. (C/NF) There is no doubt that President Ben Ali will win the 2009 elections by a landslide. What remains to be seen is whether the GOT will allow even a slightly more level playing field for opposition parties by liberalizing media access and allowing them more freedom of maneuver to campaign freely. We are not optimistic. Several Embassy contacts, mostly journalists, say they have been encouraged to tone down criticism of the RCD and President Ben Ali in the months leading up to the elections, or face the consequences. Parliamentary elections may offer another opportunity for progress, although it is unclear whether the GOT will be any more amiable to a more democratic process for the legislative branch. While at-Tajdid's willingness to carry the banner for free and fair elections is encouraging, it could end up costing the party parliamentary seats. As for the PDP, a proposal to make Secretary General Maya Jribi the party's presidential candidate instead of Nejib Chebbi will reportedly be on the agenda for the next Central Committee meeting, but PDP insiders say that the party is unlikely to switch candidates. End Comment.
GODEC